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Past & Repast With the Reagans

Honoring the OSS Veterans, Greeting the 'Caine' Crew

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President and Nancy Reagan stepped back into the '40s last night.

First, a big ballroom dinner honoring "intelligence and support resistance against totalitarianism in World War II." Second, the Kennedy Center's production of Herman Wouk's "The Caine Mutiny Court-Martial," setting: 1945.

Follow the limo to its first stop, a black-tie dinner of cloak-and-dagger alumni, which one person described as "a roomful of spies."

The Veterans of the Office of Strategic Services awarded Reagan with the General William J. Donovan Medal, named for the legendary citizen-soldier-diplomat who launched the Army's World War II intelligence effort, the precursor to the CIA.

The aging agents honored Reagan as a president who has "rallied the world to the cause of democracy, predicting the ultimate doom of totalitarianism and the eventual triumph of representative government."

It was a gathering of both the overt and covert in military intelligence, plus Anita Bryant, who "came as a guest of Mr. James Lyon of Houston, Texas."

Reagan arrived at the Washington Hilton a bit early.

"I asked Bill Casey where it was," said Reagan, "and he said go to the corner of 17th and K and wait for the phone to ring."

The former agents and spouses laughed.

"I asked if this dinner was going to be black tie," said Reagan, "and was told 'No, trench coat.'"

More laughter.

"It's not a roomful of spies," said author Jerry Sage, in Army dress. He preferred the term "reunion," and dived into war stories.

"You know that movie 'The Great Escape'? Kid named McQueen was playing my part. I was in jail nine times. They called me the Cooler King I was in solitary so much."

Reagan, however, had no such tales.

"We are rightly regarded as a candid and open people who pride ourselves on our free society," the president said. "And yet our . . .

intelligence agencies—from Nathan Hale to Midway . . . have not written just a striking, stirring chapter in our history but have often provided the key to victory in war and the preservation of our freedom during an uneasy peace."

Reagan didn't stay for dinner.

Instead, the limo raced to the Kennedy Center for the 7:30 performance of Wouk's "Caine Mutiny." The Reagans took their seats just a few minutes before the show started.

People from the audience lined the sides of the Eisenhower Theater, waiting for a glimpse.

In Row K, they were saying things like, "Well, if anybody falls asleep tonight, it will be with the best of them."

Immediately after the show, the president and his wife went backstage to shake hands with members of the cast.

Herman Wouk was the first one in the room.

"It was a great honor you came," said Wouk.

"It was great," said Nancy Reagan. The president mostly just smiled.

Next came the show's producer, Joseph Wouk, son of the author.

"Hope you enjoyed the show," said Wouk.

"It was just great," said Nancy Reagan.

Most of the cast kind of murmured a "pleased to meet you," or "honor to meet you" to the couple. But a few spoke up for the press.

"You're my favorite president since Jefferson Davis," said one.

"My father's gonna faint when he sees this picture," said another.

One actor, dressed in a sailor uniform from the play, said, "Mr. President, it's very thrilling for a simple enlisted man to meet the commander in chief." Reagan really smiled at that.

The show's prop master Gonzalo Gonzales came in proudly displaying a T-shirt that said "Gonzo Goes to Washington."

Charlton Heston and his wife were met with hugs, kisses and compliments.

Actor Frank Aletter, veteran of Broadway and TV, stepped up to the president and said, "Think you might want to go back and do some character work?"

Reagan replied, "Maybe if it's 'The Life of Mickey Rooney.'"